




# KIEL UPRISING: WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND THE GERMAN REVOLUTION NOVEMBER 1918

## TEACHING MATERIALS

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## Introduction

This pack of teaching materials was created as part of the project “Kiel Uprising: Women's Activism and the German Revolution November 1918” funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It uses questions and ideas generated by the travelling exhibition “Women of Aktion”. It is recommended that the panels for this exhibition, available to download as a PDF, are displayed.

## Teachers' Fact File

### How did the First World War end?

In countries across Europe, not everyone supported the war. In April 1915, over one thousand women travelled to The Hague from neutral and belligerent nations to protest the war and discuss ways to prevent wars in the future. 28 women travelled from Germany where anti-war activism continued throughout the war but, as publications were heavily censored, getting the message out was very difficult. Many anti-war protestors were arrested or had to flee but despite these difficulties, they persevered.

The German Home Front experienced shortages and deprivations which further undermined support for the war. From August 1914, the allies had instituted an economic blockade to prevent Germany from importing much needed food, fertilisers and raw materials. As Germany had depended on these imports before the war, and as 1914 saw a weak harvest, food shortages became widespread. This resulted in inflated prices and people's wages were not enough to cover their costs. Many people believed that the government was mismanaging resources and so there were riots. Workers went on strike to protest their working conditions and by 1915 unrest and protest were frequent occurrences. 1916/17 was the hardest winter as people struggled to find enough to eat and it became known as the 'Turnip Winter'. People tried to replace missing food with items they could find; coffee was made with roasted acorns, bread was made with chalk or sawdust, and turnips were often the only food people could find. People queued for hours to try and buy food but when they got to the front of the queue, food had often run out or wealthier people were able to buy up supplies. This malnutrition led to illness and death.

As the situation in Germany grew worse, people joined the anti-war activists in protest and blamed the Kaiser (Emperor) and his government for the war. There were mass demonstrations in major cities. In October 1918, the German High Command decided to send the navy on a final push against the allies. Some sailors saw this as a suicide mission and so they refused to follow orders. The sailors were sent to the port of Kiel (north Germany) where they were imprisoned. The townspeople of Kiel

began to protest in solidarity with the sailors; they demanded their immediate release and the end of the war. The government sent soldiers who fired on the protestors and seven people were killed. The protests grew and the people marched on the prison. They secured the release of the sailors and took over governance of the town.

The protest spread across Germany as ordinary men and women called for an end to the war and the overthrow of the ruling elite. In two days the revolution had spread from the north of Germany to Munich in the south. On the 9 November 1918, the Kaiser fled and the revolutionaries took over government.

The revolution brought voting rights for all men and women over the age of twenty. The Kaiser and all the ruling families fled leaving a new democratic system to be formed.

The war ended because ordinary people said 'no'. They decided to work together to bring about change.

## Key Questions

What would you have done?

Why did some people oppose the war?

How do you stop a war?

How can we work together to bring about change today?

## Questions from the exhibition

### Panel 1

How many people died in the First World War?

How did the war end in Germany?

How was this different in Britain?

Who was Minna Cauer and how did she react when the war ended?

What happened to the German emperor?

### Panel 2

Did everyone in Germany support the war?

Why did women meet at The Hague in 1915?

What did they say about the war?

### **Panel 3**

How did the war change German society?

How did German workers respond to the hardships they were suffering?

### **Panel 4**

How was the supply of food affected by the war?

What was the most common food in the winter of 1916/17?

How did the lack of food affect people's health?

How did the women express their frustrations?

### **Panel 5**

How did the German revolution begin?

How did this bring the war to an end?

Why did the Kaiser (Emperor of Germany) abdicate (give up his throne)?

### **Panel 6**

What did the revolutionary men and women want?

### **Panel 7**

Everyone over the age of 20 got the vote in November 1918 and women were able to vote for the first time. How did this change the relationship between people and the state?

### **Panel 8**

Who were Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht?

What happened to them?

Why are they still remembered today?

### **Panel 8**

Did the revolution pave the way to Hitler and the Third Reich? List arguments for and against this view

Why did the Germans object so strongly to the Versailles Treaty?

What was the White Rose and what did it stand for?

Who was Sophie Scholl and what happened to her? How old was she when she died?

Why do Germans think it is important to remember Sophie and Hans Scholl and Christoph Probst?

### **Activities**

Imagine you are living in Germany during the war:

Write a short speech to protest against the war – how does it affect your life and why do you want it to end?

How would you persuade your family to eat the turnips? Can you think of some new recipes?  
Imagine you and your friends are queueing in the cold for 6 hours to get some food. What do you think you would talk about? How would you react if it was all gone before you reached the front of the queue?

The revolution was a chance for people to imagine a new society and make it fairer for everyone: what changes would you make to society to make it better for everyone? Make a list of the most important changes.

Write a list of all the reasons why having the vote is important for democracy.

In 1918, some people argued that women shouldn't be allowed to vote because they weren't politically educated. Nowadays people argue that children under the age of 18 shouldn't be allowed to vote because they aren't mature enough. List all the arguments for and against bringing the voting age down to 16.

Sophie Scholl was executed for handing out leaflets protesting against the National Socialists' policies and the misery of the war they had created. It was a high price to pay but was it the right thing to do? List all the reasons you can think of for and against her actions.

Do you think that friendships between people of different nations can help to prevent war?

Do you think that people should have the right to criticise decisions they disagree with?

## Topics in-depth for further exploration

1. Käthe Kollwitz: art as activism
2. Rosa Luxemburg
3. The White Rose

## Websites for further study

### The German Revolution

Alexander Gallus: Revolutions (Germany) [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-revolutions\\_germany-2014-10-08.pdf](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-revolutions_germany-2014-10-08.pdf)

### Käthe Kollwitz:

<https://nmwa.org/explore/artist-profiles/kathe-kollwitz>

<https://www.moma.org/artists/3201>

<http://www.kollwitz.de/en/rundgang.aspx>

**Spartakus education:** <https://spartacus-educational.com/RUSluxemburg.htm>

### The White Rose:

<https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/nazi-germany/the-white-rose-movement/>

Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team:

<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/revolt/whiterose.html>

**The Women's international League for Peace and Freedom:**

<https://wilpf.org/>

History: <https://wilpf.org/wilpf/history/>

**General:**

The History Place: [historyplace.com](http://historyplace.com)

The History Learning Site: A Level and GCSE materials: [historylearningsite.co.uk](http://historylearningsite.co.uk)

The German Film Learning Initiative: [germanfilm.co.uk](http://germanfilm.co.uk)

Especially: *Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage* 2005 and *Das Weisse Band* 2009

## **Art as Activism: Käthe Kollwitz in the 1920s**

Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) was one of the most significant and successful graphic artists and sculptors in Germany in the 1920s. In January 1919 at age 52 she became the first woman to be elected to the Prussian Academy of Arts, and from July that year she held (though rarely used) the title of Professor. Although the financial rewards were modest, she received much recognition for her art until the National Socialists came to power in 1933. They objected to her political affiliations and her open hostility to National Socialism. She was dismissed from her Academy position in 1933, and prevented from exhibiting her work, although they did not directly threaten her safety or prevent her from working as they did with some other artists.

In the decades since she began exhibiting, she has been positioned variously as a left-wing political artist, even a revolutionary producing crude socialist propaganda, a pacifist artist protesting against World War I, and a sentimental, even kitsch artist whose intense moral and social engagement was out of step with the spirit of an age more attuned to ironic detachment.

Kollwitz is especially celebrated as an artist of loss, mourning and compassion for her depiction of human suffering, especially of women, children and the working class. The poster, *Germany's children are starving*, produced for International Workers' Relief in 1923, illustrates the emotional appeal and immediacy of Kollwitz's art. It was deliberately

reproducible – she used woodcuts, lithographs and etchings to make her work available to a wide audience.

**Image 1: Germany's children are starving, poster for International Workers' Relief, 1923**

The loss of her son, Peter, in October 1914 forced her to struggle with and finally arrive at an anti-war position that placed the lives of the individual human being above all abstractions such as patriotism, revolution, sacrifice and opposed all violence in the cause of such abstractions.

These notes focus on Kollwitz's post-war activism for a number of social and political causes as well as her anti-war engagement and look at how this finds expression in her art primarily during the 1920s.

The consequences of the war were especially visible in Berlin, where Kollwitz was based for her adult life— soldiers with missing limbs, blind, or shell-shocked and widows with children in desperate need, while many Prisoners of War (PoWs) were not returned to Germany until 1919.

**Image 2: *Give us back our PoWs* 1920.** The German text reads 'everyone should join the German PoW and Internee Protection League.'

The revolution had abolished censorship, which allowed political freedom of expression but also the freedom to challenge middle class morality in the area of sexuality and reproductive rights – so we see campaigns around abortion and homosexuality as well as demonstrations for social justice and the distribution of wealth and property.

It was also a period in which the peace movement, silenced during the war, emerged and became a major force.

Kollwitz supported a number of these progressive causes with works on

1. Revolution and politics
2. Social justice and the poverty and suffering of the w/class
3. Anti-war campaigns



Kollwitz's political stance can be described as broadly socialist, but she was not committed to any party, and her art is not as overtly political as some of the artists supporting specifically the communist party in the 1920s. Kollwitz's work has been accused of being static, introspective and thus lacking in dynamism. For many she is an artist expressing the sorrows of the world but not offering much to oppose it.

Kollwitz used her art extensively to engage with politics and with some of the major social and political issues and campaigns of the time. She used her art to highlight social injustice and suffering, accepting commissions from a number of different organisations. The posters she produced for the abortion campaign, in solidarity with the starving people of Russia, Germany and Austria, always with a focus on working class suffering and strength.

**Image 3: Nieder mit dem Abtreibungsparagraphen, (Down with the Abortion Paragraph) 1924, produced for the KPD (German Communist Party)**

Abortion was a criminal offence in Weimar Germany and Kollwitz's art often shows the desperation of working class women forced to bear children they couldn't afford to feed. Her husband, Karl, was a doctor working in a working class area of Berlin so she saw these women's lives at first hand.

Reproductive rights were an issue that affected all women, but in particular the poorest women, with little choice but to produce large numbers of children to the detriment of health, family economy and low infant survival. Her representations of pregnancy and motherhood show the despair of women ground down by the cycle of birth and maternity with scant resources.

**Image 4: John Heartfield 'Forced deliverer of Human Material' 1930 Käthe Kollwitz 'At the Doctor's' 1909**

This compares Kollwitz's use of pregnant women's bodies with that of another politically engaged artist, John Heartfield (1891-1968). Heartfield's depiction – its message spelled out very clearly in the title – is more overt than Kollwitz's more subtle representations but the message is the same – the despair of working class women forced to bear children the state wants but cannot support.

**Image 5: Hunger! 1923 NB: this is a strong image that is not suitable for younger children. The same discussion can be had using the poster 'Germany's Children are Starving' (image 1) or Bread! (image 6)**

During the post-war period, defeated nations were critically short of food. The blockade keeping food and raw materials from reaching Germany and Austria did not cease with the armistice in November 1918 but continued until the peace treaties were signed in June 1919 and many families were literally starving – children were severely stunted and vulnerable to diseases of malnutrition. It was at this time that a new verb entered the German language 'quäkern– to quaker' meaning to feed and nurture, named after the Quakers who distributed food to the starving children of Germany and Austria –Hungary. At the same time the phrase 'die englische Krankheit' - the English sickness - was used to describe the health consequences of the blockade. She captured images of starvation to highlight these crises in support of charities and relief organisations

**Image 6 1924: Brot! Bread! / Help Russia 1921**

1924: Brot! Bread!: This was for a special portfolio of lithographs on the theme of hunger intended to raise money for economic victims of the war

Help Russia 1921: a poster highlighting the famine in the Volga region of Soviet Russia. In her diary she wrote: 'some might say that art with a purpose is not pure art, but as long as I can work I want my art to have an effect in this world.'

Her art was political and aimed at provoking action to alleviate the suffering she portrayed, although she sometimes despaired of her own helplessness.

**Image 7 Vienna is Dying. Save its children! 1920.** Commissioned by an international aid organisation

She wrote in her diary: 'While I drew ... I really felt the burden I am bearing. I felt that I have no right to withdraw from the responsibility of being an advocate. It is my duty to voice the sufferings of men, the never-ending sufferings heaped mountain high.'

Work is supposed to relieve you, but is it any relief when in spite of my poster people in Vienna are dying of hunger every day? And when I know that?’

In 1923 the poster *The Survivors* (Die Überlebenden), was commissioned by the International trade Union Congress in Amsterdam for display at the first international anti-war day in 1924.

### **Activism for Peace**

Kollwitz’s first public anti-war statement came in November 1918. This comes in response to the poet Richard Dehmel’s published appeal for even more recruits to fight a war that was now clearly a hopeless cause. The poet’s open letter, printed in the Social Democrats’ newspaper, *Vorwärts*, on 22 October 1918, is essentially a renewed appeal to the romantic ideal of redemptive sacrifice. Kollwitz responds: “There has been enough death! No one else should be allowed to die!”

### **Image 8 The survivors 1924**

In this image, the blind, the broken, and the exhausted have been left to regenerate a morally and spiritually depleted population.

This is Kollwitz’s central insight: war continues its devastation long after the battles are over. The survivors of the conflict will endure, but at what cost? Yet KK’s suffering figures are not crushed by their suffering. They endure, and in enduring develop the will and the strength to resist, their diminished state a visual indictment of the war. Kollwitz is never an advocate of violent struggle: her revolutionary zeal dissipates in the face of the corrupting effect of violence.

Of revolutionary socialism she writes on 21 March 1922, “What’s the good of achieving better conditions but with worse people?”

It was Kollwitz’s understanding of war as nothing but loss, with no saving sense of purpose that led her to her overt anti-war stance.

1920s saw the rise of peace groups in Germany – veterans for peace, never again war movement, women’s league for peace and freedom, and the war resisters league - WRI. The anti-war impulse took on the character of a mass movement until the mid 20s, with August 1<sup>st</sup> marked each year by Nie wieder Krieg/ Never Again War demonstrations in which artists and intellectuals played a leading role.

### **Image 9: Nie wieder Krieg! Never again War! 1924**

Instead this is one of her most famous and dynamic posters, produced for the Leipzig Never again war! demonstration in 1924, the high point of the mass anti-war movement in Germany.

We can also see the development in some of her key motifs, for example the image of protective mothers shielding their children from dangers from outside, but also from within, becoming increasingly dynamic throughout the 1920s until its final manifestation in 1941.

### **Image 10: Development of ideas: *Mothers/ Mütter* 1919 and 1923**

In this image, the mothers seek to protect their children, but in the 1938 version their protection has become far more dynamic and effective.

### **Image 11: Tower of mothers; *Turm der Mütter* bronze 1937-8**

until by 1941 the protective stance has become a call to action.

### **Image 12: *Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden: Seeds for the sowing should not be ground, 1941.***

In this poster it takes on the force of an angry challenge, a demand for peace: “This demand is, like ‘Never again war,’ not an expression of sentimental longing but a command” (Diaries December 1941 705). Writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s (1749-1832) phrase “seeds for the sowing must not be ground” (“Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden”) had been a leitmotif in Kollwitz’s writing since the first weeks after Peter’s death, but only now does she allow herself to express its full meaning: There can be no regeneration for a nation that squanders its future.

Kollwitz's work continues to be both celebrated and depoliticised in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, a good example of this can be seen in the adoption of Kollwitz's statue 'Mother with her dead son' as a universal symbol of mourning for the victims of war and totalitarianism in Berlin at the newly dedicated *Neue Wache* after German Unification.

**Image 13: Mother with her dead son (1937-8) and the Neue Wache *Pietà* (1993)**

This was criticised by opponents because:

1. Expanding the dedication of the Neue Wache to all victims lessened the viewers' sense of specific suffering - especially that of the Jews - and guilt, specifically the guilt of German perpetrators.
2. The apparently Christian symbol was seen as inappropriate when commemorating non-Christian victim groups. The title *Pietà* was not Kollwitz's but its use draws the figure into Christian imagery.
3. For some, the artistic integrity of the statue was compromised by the change in size from ca 40 cm to ca 160 cm.
4. The comfort offered by the mourning mother was false, as the point was that no one left to mourn most of the victims of the Holocaust, as entire families were annihilated and mothers and children formed a large part of those who were killed.
5. The then German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's (1930-2017) interpretation of the statue in this context as placing humanity at the centre and offering hope of redemption shows a failure to engage with the consequences of Kollwitz's message – in her art, the supreme value of the embodied individual is not a way of making sense of suffering, but rather a challenging and powerful anti-war statement that offers no easy comfort and no hope of redemption through sacrifice.

Käthe Kollwitz's work shows huge compassion for her working class subjects and for the whole of humanity, but her desire to work against war and for social justice is highly political and anything but cosy or sentimental. It may lack the overt political message of other engaged artists of the period, but in depicting the suffering and loss of the primary victims of the war, her work stands as a powerful and effective indictment of war.

**Image 14: Die Eltern/Parents 1932**

Her political message was sometimes overlooked by critics who expected a more obvious anti-war gesture. In 1932 when she displayed her two memorial figures 'mourning parents' in Berlin prior to their placement in the German war cemetery at Dixmude in Flanders. The left wing press condemned them as they didn't see the 'anti-war gesture' in the figures. Kollwitz saw this as 'stupid' and as counterproductive, as it meant that working class did not come to see the figures. But this just shows us how narrow the definition of what constitutes anti-war art can be. There is an expectation that anti-war gestures must be overtly, even crudely political, and must show defiance and violent resistance by the subjects, not introspection and the weight of sorrow. Yet the depiction of the effects of war can be just as effective and indeed may have more resonance with the post-war experience. Kollwitz's pacifism, like her art, was not instinctive. Her diaries reveal that it was a position she reached only after a struggle, first with an idealistic view of sacrifice and duty and then with her son's death. She felt for many years that to be against the war was to betray his passionate love for his country but in the end she reached a position where the killing and dying made no more sense and she was compelled to oppose it. Her pacifism is not supposed to be passive either, as the increasing dynamism of her images shows. Instead of the iconic image of sacrifice expected of them, Kollwitz's mothers are refusing to hand over their sons, however much they want to go, and instead are working against war with increasing energy and confidence in their resistance.

Kollwitz was an anti-war artist who set up her viewpoint of what war is in opposition to the official story. She challenged the idea of duty and sacrifice, the passivity of women and the idea that war could ennoble a nation, seeing only loss and diminishment as the central experience of war. In claiming the right to bear witness to war without going near the front line, she challenged the notion that war is just the actual combat and that it is exclusively male. If we look beyond the poignancy of her story and the emotional accessibility of her images and take her seriously as a war artists, the result has to be to challenge our understanding of what war is and where the boundaries of war lie.

As well as being effective in conveying a message, her art is also very good. Regardless of her subjects and her political sympathies, Käthe Kollwitz was one of the truly great artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, producing innovative, pioneering and distinctive art with supreme

technical command and an absolute mastery of composition, talents and skills she used in supporting the causes of peace and social justice.

### **Teaching Activities and notes**

You can find out more about Käthe Kollwitz using the following links:

<https://nmwa.org/explore/artist-profiles/kathe-kollwitz>

<https://www.moma.org/artists/3201>

<http://www.kollwitz.de/en/rundgang.aspx>

Suggested activities

1. Show pupils the posters and ask them to tell you what they are about and how they make them feel. Ask them to suggest titles or slogans to accompany the posters.  
Could any of them be used to highlight similar social problems today (e.g. food bank use, family homelessness, disability as highlighted in the UN report on UK poverty 2018 [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/EOM\\_GB\\_16Nov2018.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/EOM_GB_16Nov2018.pdf))
- 2.

### **Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights London, 16 November 2018**

#### **“Introduction**

The UK is the world’s fifth largest economy, it contains many areas of immense wealth, its capital is a leading centre of global finance, its entrepreneurs are innovative and agile, and despite the current political turmoil, it has a system of government that rightly remains the envy of much of the world. It thus seems patently unjust and contrary to British values that so many people are living in poverty. This is obvious to anyone who opens their eyes to see the immense growth in foodbanks and the queues waiting outside them, the people sleeping rough in the streets, the growth of homelessness, the sense of deep despair that leads even the Government to appoint a Minister for suicide prevention and civil society to report in depth on unheard of levels of loneliness and isolation. And local authorities, especially in England, which perform vital roles in providing a real social safety net have been gutted by a series of government policies. Libraries have closed in record numbers, community and youth centers have been shrunk and underfunded, public spaces and buildings including parks and recreation centers have been sold off. While the labour and

housing markets provide the crucial backdrop, the focus of this report is on the contribution made by social security and related policies.

The results? 14 million people, a fifth of the population, live in poverty. Four million of these are more than 50% below the poverty line,<sup>1</sup> and 1.5 million are destitute, unable to afford basic essentials. The widely respected Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts a 7% rise in child poverty between 2015 and 2022, and various sources predict child poverty rates of as high as 40%. For almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty-first century Britain is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one.”

Are there any social problems that were not issues in the 1920s that are more important today? (e.g. climate breakdown, cyber-bullying, gender recognition).

3. Design a poster in the style of Käthe Kollwitz on a subject that the pupils feel strongly about – go for clear designs, clear message, immediate appeal and reproducibility
4. Research Käthe Kollwitz’s life and work online to find out more about other aspects of her work, especially her War Cycle exhibited in Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and discussed on their website. Pupils could also look at the work of John Heartfield (1891-1968) or at DaDa as further examples of politically engaged art.
5. Kollwitz wanted people to know about the social problems affecting the world and to make them care enough to do something about them. Consider other ways of doing this and think about which methods are the most effective (e.g. Band Aid, Children in Need charity events and sales etc., international organisations such as the World Wildlife Foundation and Amnesty International or Oxfam). Encourage the pupils to share their own experiences of raising money for charity or for causes they think are important.
6. Ask the pupils to put forward suggestions for a charity or cause that the class might support and vote on the results. Support this cause using posters and other methods suggested by the class.



## Rosa Luxemburg

Rosa Luxemburg was a leading revolutionary theorist and leader of the anti-war Spartacus League. On January 1919, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were killed by Freikorps soldiers and government troops in Berlin. Karl Liebknecht was shot in a thickly wooded park and his body recovered for burial but Rosa Luxemburg's body was thrown into the Landwehr Canal and did not resurface until June 1919. Their deaths were part of the violent suppression of revolutionary council control in German towns and cities that left more than 2000 dead by March 1919.

## Women in the German Revolution

Until very recently, the German Revolution of 1918 has been viewed as an exclusively male affair and, apart from Rosa Luxemburg, the historical figures that have emerged as revolutionary leaders were generally male. But there are several accounts by women who saw themselves as themselves as active participants in the revolutionary events with clear goals for the new social order that it would bring in. For many socialist, pacifist or feminist women, who had often been politically active for years before 1914, the revolution was seen as a chance to realise long-term political or social goals such as female suffrage or a socialist form of government. On November 12<sup>th</sup> 1918 universal suffrage for both men and women over the age of 20 was announced, making the German franchise one of the freest and most democratic in the developed world – British women over the age of 30 had gained the vote in January 1918, 21 year olds had to wait until 1928 and French women were not enfranchised until 1944.

Women who had campaigned for peace during the war welcomed the revolution as it swept away the militarist, imperialist regime that they held responsible for the war and opened the way to a more peaceful democratic social order. The German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II fled and on November 9<sup>th</sup>, Imperial rule was replaced with participatory democracy, allowing the interim government to sue for peace. Two days later, on 11 November 1918, the Armistice was signed and there was a cease fire while the terms of the peace were negotiated in Paris.

The majority of revolutionary women were members of socialist parties, the SPD, (or MSPD), the majority social democratic party that had supported German war aims; the USPD or independent social democratic party that had split from the SPD in 1917 over its support for the war, and the Spartacus League (later KPD or Communist Party) led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The outstanding revolutionary theorist and the best-known of the women was undoubtedly Rosa Luxemburg. Fluent in four languages, Luxemburg was born in Russian-controlled Poland, and from a

young age had dedicated her fierce intelligence and passionate conviction to the Socialist cause. In Germany in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century the Socialist party (SPD) enjoyed mass popular support and was the strongest elected party. From her arrival in Berlin in 1898, Luxemburg was an outstanding figure in German Socialist circles and contributed considerably to the development of socialist economic and revolutionary theory. Socialism had very strong international links and was ideologically opposed to wars for territorial and commercial gain, in which the working classes were inevitably the losers, and Luxemburg too was utterly opposed to war. In 1913 she called for resistance to conscription at an SPD rally: 'If they expect us to turn murderous weapons against our brothers in France or elsewhere, we will shout: "We will not do that!"' For this she was sentenced to a year's imprisonment in February for 'incitement to disobedience against authority'.

### The Spartacus League

During the war, military censorship made it almost impossible to express opposition to the war. In August 1914, despite its internationalist, anti-war position, the SPD voted almost unanimously for war credits, with only Karl Liebknecht opposing the motion in the Reichstag. This is described in vivid terms in Luxemburg's 1915 *Junius* pamphlet, which ends with a warning to the SPD that they would have to stand aside "to make room for people capable of dealing with a new world." In February 1916, Liebknecht and Luxemburg formed an underground political organisation called the Spartacus Group (Spartakusgruppe), which published the *Spartacus Letters* (*Spartakusbriefe*), illegal newsheets aimed at stirring up resistance to the war. In May 1916, they organised a mass anti-war rally in Berlin that attracted 10,000 people, but this led to their arrest and imprisonment. Liebknecht was released in October 1918 under a general amnesty, but Luxemburg remained in prison until November 9<sup>th</sup> 1918, a total of 30 months or 842 days.

Luxemburg reached Berlin on 10<sup>th</sup> November, a day after both Philipp Scheidemann (SPD) and Karl Liebknecht (USPD) had both declared German Republics in Berlin – it was clear that there were different views about what the new democracy should look like. For many, the point of the revolution had been to end the war, and on 12<sup>th</sup> November the Council of the People's Deputies under the leadership of Friedrich Ebert, put forward a new programme that met several long-standing demands of the unions and workers. These included votes for every German citizen over the age of 20, including women; the 8 hour working day, a lifting of censorship, freedom of association and of expression, as well as promises about welfare support for unemployment and the fair distribution of food. Although it promised an improvement in workers' lives, this was not a

revolutionary programme – it protected private property and did nothing to address social and economic inequality, and for Luxemburg it did not go far enough.

Luxemburg was soon in the thick of revolutionary organising. As Spartacus leader and editor of the newly founded newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag), she tried to shape the revolution towards direct democracy led by the workers and away from violence as a means of achieving progress. On November 11<sup>th</sup>, the illegal Spartacus Group gave way to the Spartacus League (Spartakusbund) that was committed to carrying the revolution forward to achieve lasting changes. The full programme was set out in the publication in the *Rote Fahne* (Red Flag) of December 1918 *What does the Spartacus League want?* which was written by Luxemburg. In it she called for the overthrow of capitalism as an economic system, and claimed that only international socialism offered any hope of restoring peace, order and prosperity to a broken world. She called for nationalisation of utilities and transport, confiscation of private property, the reorganising of labour into collectives and fair distribution of food. Despite Luxemburg's heartfelt opposition to violence and support for direct democracy, the programme advocates an armed proletariat and ends with a call to violence against enemies of the revolution 'thumbs on their eyes and knees to their breasts.'

The Spartacists were a small minority within the socialist groups, and there was little popular or press support for their radical programme. They remained part of the USPD, the independent Social Democrats, until December 1918 when they broke away to form the KPD, the German Communist Party and continued to warn against the counter-revolution.

Working with the councils, Chancellor Friedrich Ebert of the SPD had managed to secure their support for the proposed elections to a national assembly planned for January 1919, which Luxemburg vehemently opposed in the pages of *Die Rote Fahne*. She argued that parliamentary democracy would only benefit the middle classes and preferred the direct democracy of the workers' and soldiers' councils, or Räte. She reminded her readers that the bourgeoisie were not a political party to be reasoned with, but the ruling class that needed to be overthrown.

On 5<sup>th</sup> January 1919, thousands of Berliners came onto the streets to protest against the dismissal of their popular chief of police, Emil Eichhorn. Against Luxemburg's better judgement, the Spartacists attempted to turn this into an armed insurrection aimed at wresting control from the SPD and pushing forward with their revolutionary goals. Predictably, the small group were unable to withstand the combined power of government forces backed by all the resources of the state and

armed paramilitary *Freikorps* groups working under the command of Ebert's government, and the uprising was soon crushed.

## Violence

The polarisation of the revolutionary period contributed to an increased culture of violence encouraged and stirred up by industrialists and the reactionary press, who were open in their loathing of the Spartacists. The brutal response to the Spartacus Uprising marked a new phase in the revolution and made clear that the government was willing to work with the far-right armed paramilitary *Freikorps* and suppress opposition by killing its own people. The violence was also gendered: although Karl Liebknecht was a hate figure, Rosa Luxemburg as a Jewish woman attracted particular vilification. Her brutal killing reflected an increased willingness to use extreme violence against proletarian women, whose participation in the revolution appeared to place them outside any claim to the protection of men or the state. On the night of January 15th-16<sup>th</sup> 1919, first Liebknecht and then Luxemburg were taken from their Berlin hotel and killed. Liebknecht was driven into the Tiergarten park in Berlin and shot out of sight of witnesses, his corpse later anonymously deposited at a morgue, but Luxemburg was struck down in the hotel lobby in public view. Beaten with rifle butts, shot at close range, her lifeless body was thrown into Berlin's Landwehr canal, only resurfacing six months later on 1<sup>st</sup> June. The government publicly denied any role in the killings, blaming the violence on the Spartacists, who 'had brought their fate upon themselves.' No written order for their deaths exists, but it is clear that their deaths were carried out by *Freikorps* troops working hand in hand with the government to suppress the uprising.

## Activities

1. How much can you find out about Rosa Luxemburg? Why is she an important figure in German history?
2. Read these quotations, taken from Rosa Luxemburg's speeches and writing and explain what she meant. Do you agree with what she says?
  - "War is methodical, organised, gigantic murder" (1916)
  - Freedom only for members of the government, for members of the Party – though they are quite numerous – is no freedom at all. Freedom is always the freedom of those who think differently *The Russian Revolution* (1918)
  - "The most revolutionary thing you can do is always to proclaim loudly what is happening."
  - "Before a revolution happens, it is perceived as impossible; after it happens, it is seen as having been inevitable."

- “Those who don’t move don’t notice their chains”
  - “Being human means throwing your whole life on the scales of destiny when need be, all the while rejoicing in every sunny day and every beautiful cloud.
3. Write a sentence or short paragraph that expresses one aspect of how you see the world and see if your classmates understand what you mean. [This can be done anonymously and the sentences folded and placed in the centre of the table and read out and discussed in turn].
  4. Rosa Luxemburg spent much of WW1 in prison for opposing the war. She wrote a lot of letters to friends and supporters. If you could write her a letter, what would you say to her?

## Further materials

Spartakus education: <https://spartacus-educational.com/RUSluxemburg.htm>

Film: *Rosa Luxemburg*, Margarethe von Trotta, 1986

## The White Rose Movement

### Teacher’s notes

Sophie Scholl, along with her brother Hans and fellow Munich students Alexander Schmorell, Willi Graf, and Christoph Probst, founded the White Rose Movement in 1942. The young men had been sent to the Eastern Front as part of their training to become doctors where they had seen horrific actions committed by the German army and witnessed anti-Nazi resistance. When they returned to Munich, they shared their experiences with like-minded students and began to talk about how to resist the Nazi regime.

Resistance was very difficult and dangerous. Even young children were indoctrinated through Hitler Youth groups and encouraged to report any anti-Nazi activities. The group began to write and distribute leaflets. In February 1943, while attempting to distribute their sixth publication, Sophie and Hans were captured. They both denied that anyone else was involved but Christoph Probst is identified as the author. All three are executed within 24 hours of the initial arrest. Over the following months the rest of the group are arrested and sentenced to death.

The movement inspired others and further acts of resistance. Other Munich students took the leaflets to cities across Germany and the White Rose Movement was frequently mentioned and celebrated by the foreign press to encourage further resistance in Germany. Those involved in

resistance undertook great risk, both personally, as many were executed or given long prison sentences, and for their families, who were often persecuted as well.

Today the White Rose Movement is widely commemorated in Germany. There is a literature prize dedicated to the Scholl siblings and many German cities have streets, squares and schools named after members of the Movement.

## Sources

1. Elisabeth Scholl, interviewed by the Daily Mirror (17th January, 2014)

"We learned in the spring of 1942 of the arrest and execution of 10 or 12 Communists. And my brother (Hans Scholl) said, 'In the name of civic and Christian courage something must be done.' Sophie knew the risks. Fritz Hartnagel told me about a conversation in May 1942. Sophie asked him for a thousand marks but didn't want to tell him why. He warned her that resistance could cost both her head and her neck. She told him, 'I'm aware of that'. Sophie wanted the money to buy a printing press to publish the anti-Nazi leaflets."

2. Inge Scholl, *The White Rose: 1942-1943* (1983)

"During the transport to the front their train had stopped for a few minutes at a Polish station. Along the embankment he saw women and girls bent over and doing heavy men's work with picks. They wore the yellow Star of David on their blouses. Hans slipped through the window of his car and approached. The first one in the group was a young, emaciated girl with small, delicate hands and a beautiful, intelligent face that bore an expression of unspeakable sorrow. Did he have anything that he might give to her? He remembered his Iron Ration - a bar of chocolate, raisins, and nuts - and slipped it into her pocket. The girl threw it on the ground at his feet with a harassed but infinitely proud gesture. He picked it up, smiled, and said, "I wanted to do something to please you". Then he bent down, picked a daisy, and placed it and the package at her feet. The train was starting to move, and Hans had to take a couple of long leaps to get back on. From the window he could see that the girl was standing still, watching the departing train, the white flower in her hair."

According to sources 1 and 2, what motivated these students to act?

3. Roland Friesler, of the People's Court, describing the charges against Sophie Scholl (21st February, 1943)

The accused, Sophie Scholl, as early as the summer of 1942 took part in political discussions, in which she and her brother, Hans Scholl, came to the conclusion that Germany had lost the war. She

admits to having taken part in preparing and distributing the leaflets in 1943. Together, with her brother she drafted the text of the seditious Leaflets of the Resistance in Germany. In addition, she had a part in the purchasing of paper, envelopes and stencils, and together with her brother she actually prepared the duplicated copies of the leaflet. She put the prepared letters into various mailboxes, and she took part in the distribution of leaflets in Munich. She accompanied her brother to the university, was observed there in the act of scattering the leaflets.

What is passive resistance? What acts of passive resistance are described in Source 3?

4. Extract from the first leaflet published by the White Rose Group (June, 1942)

Nothing is so unworthy of a civilized nation as allowing itself to be "governed" without opposition by an irresponsible clique that has yielded to base instinct. It is certain that today every honest German is ashamed of his government. Who among us has any conception of the dimensions of shame that will befall us and our children when one day the veil has fallen from our eyes and the most horrible of crimes-crimes that infinitely outdistance every human measure-reach the light of day? If the German people are already so corrupted and spiritually crushed that they do not raise a hand, frivolously trusting in a questionable faith in lawful order in history; if they surrender man's highest principle, that which raises him above all other God's creatures, his free will; if they abandon the will to take decisive action and turn the wheel of history and thus subject it to their own rational decision; if they are so devoid of all individuality, have already gone so far along the road toward turning into a spiritless and cowardly mass - then, yes, they deserve their downfall. [...] Offer passive resistance - resistance - wherever you may be, forestall the spread of this atheistic war machine before it is too late, before the last cities, like Cologne, have been reduced to rubble, and before the nation's last young man has given his blood on some battlefield for the hubris of a sub-human. Do not forget that every people deserves the regime it is willing to endure.

Read Source 3. What techniques do the writers use to persuade the reader to act?

5. The fifth White Rose leaflet, A Call to all Germans (February, 1943)

Germans! Do you and your children want to suffer the same fate that befell the Jews? Do you want to be judged by the same standards as your traducers? Are we to be forever the nation which is hated and rejected by all mankind? No. Dissociate yourselves from National Socialist gangsterism. Prove by your deeds that you think otherwise. A new war of liberation is about to begin. The better part of the nation will fight on our side. Cast off the cloak of indifference you have wrapped around you. Make the decision before it is too late! Do not believe the National Socialist propaganda which has driven the fear of Bolshevism into your bones. Do not believe

that Germany's welfare is linked to the victory of National Socialism for good or ill. A criminal regime cannot achieve a victory. Separate yourself in time from everything connected with National Socialism. In the aftermath a terrible but just judgment will be meted out to those who stayed in hiding, who were cowardly and hesitant.... Imperialistic designs for power, regardless from which side they come, must be neutralized for all time... All centralized power, like that exercised by the Prussian state in Germany and in Europe, must be eliminated... The coming Germany must be federalistic. The working class must be liberated from its degraded conditions of slavery by a reasonable form of socialism... Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the protection of individual citizens from the arbitrary will of criminal regimes of violence - these will be the bases of the New Europe.

Read Source 4. Describe the new society the writers of this source imagined.

### Further Discussion Questions

Resistance comes in many forms, both violent and non-violent. What are some factors which may lead an individual or group to resist an oppressive regime?

The White Rose Movement used passive resistance rather than active or armed resistance. What obstacles may prevent individuals from using active or armed resistance?

What methods can people use to protest in the UK today? What risks might they face?

### Indicative answers

1. The arrest of 10 or 12 communists showed that people were willing to resist the state. Hans is motivated by "Christian and civic" duty. In Poland, he saw the horrors of forced labours (the girl is emaciated) and wants to help.
2. Passive resistance is non-violent protest or resistance. For the Scholls, this includes writing and distributing leaflets and delivering letters.
3. Rhetorical questions, vivid imagery, alliteration (blood on the battlefield), direct address to the reader (offer passive resistance, do not forget).
4. Key terms: Federalism, Socialism, Centralisation.  
They wanted power in Germany to be decentralised and a Federal system to be used.  
Workers would be protected from poverty and bad employment conditions by socialism.  
They wanted Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Religion, and protections for individuals.



## **Further information**

More teaching materials about the White Rose Movement:

<https://spartacus-educational.com/ExamRHU12.htm>

<http://libguides.usd.edu/c.php?g=753087&p=5394176>

Full texts of the leaflets:

<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/revolt/wrleaflets.html>

Further background information about the Movement and its members:

<https://www.weisse-rose-stiftung.de/white-rose-resistance-group/>

Teaching materials and information about the Holocaust

<https://www.ushmm.org/>